Let Us Face the Changed Scenario of Higher Education

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Much learned ink has been spent over how to improve the sorry state of Higher Education in the country. What is frequently overlooked in most Indian institutes of Higher Education is the inter-relationship of teaching and research — that research expands the horizon of knowledge and teaching makes it available for development of human resource. The academic planners rarely address the problem with due seriousness and hence often prescribe *ad hoc*-ist measures. On the other hand, we, the stakeholders of Higher Education, are so complacent that instead of plugging the loopholes in the system we try to get psychological comfort by looking for similar imperfection elsewhere. Metaphorically speaking, this is nothing but looking at the windows of one's neighbours at the time of load shedding to make sure that their rooms are equally dark.

The UGC has mentioned three thrust areas for its XI plan (2007-12) assistance to colleges and universities, namely *Expansion, Inclusion & Excellence*. It has been maintained that the present enrolment percentage in the country is roughly 11%, which is much less than world average of 23.25%. Again whatever growth has been achieved since the independence is marked by disparity of caste, religion, gender, region *et al.* For example, the share of Kerala is more than double the share of Bihar in Higher Education. As inequality is a reality, which cannot be wished away, the growth in Higher Education is lop-sided and the dream of empowering the underprivileged still escapes us. Besides, India can hardly boast of too many institutes of excellence and most of the centres of Higher Education are centres of mediocrity. This is also evident from the fact that we have less than 1% doctoral programmes in our universities and these too are poor by world standard. Hence the emphasis on *Expansion, Inclusion & Excellence*.

Although this diagnosis is correct, the remedy prescribed seems impractical. Consider for example, the recommendation of National Knowledge Commission for setting up of 1500 new universities (a handful of them world class) without raising the standard of existing universities. So new centres of mediocrity will come up and the so-called elite institutes, like model schools, will continue to exclude the underprivileged – thus defeating the twin goals of *Inclusion* and *Excellence*. We may take a lesson from China, another over-populated country with an elaborate system of Higher Education. India has 18,000 Higher Education institutes with 11 million enrolled students, the enrolment average being 500-600 per institute. In China the number of such institutes is just 2500 but the enrolment figure is 25 million, the average being 8000-9000 per institute. Even with that large number China has strength enough to rival the West in quality education. It is funny that UGC should dream of quality when 2% of students enrolled in central institutes continues to gobble up 85% of central assistance available for the development of Higher Education of so vast a country.

The problem actually lies in the attitude of the policy makers to Higher Education – whether to treat it as private good or public good. Private good, say a dish of cookies,

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involves rivalry in consumption; only one person at a given point of time can benefit from it and as such it cannot be shared. Public good, on the other hand, has huge externalities, which can be negative or positive. Environmental pollution, for instance, tells on the health of countless number of people; it is a negative public good. But a lighthouse is of immense help to thousands of people cutting across the line of language, religion, nationality etc; so it is a positive public good. Now it is a universally accepted economic principle that if the externalities are huge, the thing calls for public funding, for it is to be treated as public good. The Indian bureaucrats and policy makers are unwilling to admit that Higher Education is a public good, for they think that only an individual is the beneficiary here.

The ambivalent attitude of central planners to the question will be clearer if we take into account how they juggled with nomenclature in rating Higher Education. In 1995-96 White Paper on Subsidies the social sciences like philosophy were looked upon as non-merit good as here the return is very poor. Subsequently, due to strong protest from many corners the planners excogitated two categories — Merit I & Merit II. They put natural sciences & technology under the first and humanities under the second. The latter continues to be a second-class citizen, which implies that expenditure incurred thereupon, is still considered to be drainage of public fund. The reduction in subsidy is justified in terms of number theory. Only a handful of learners of this country reeling under mass illiteracy can go for Higher Education; so Higher Education subsidy is to be slashed and the fund reallocated for the development of Primary/ Secondary education. This is nothing but a cunning way of counter-posing different sectors of education, as if priority in one sector *ipso facto* demands de-prioritization of the sector against which it is counter-posed. Does it require too much of intelligence to see that the relationship here is *and*, not *versus*, as proposed by the wise policy makers of the country?

The confusion may be due to the fact that quality cannot be clearly defined in intellectual *cum* ideological communication systems like Higher Education. Education is the outcome of teaching-learning process; it is precisely an experience good, and hence eludes all branding. A machine with same input will produce consumer good of acceptable brand in thousands. But a good student in a centre of excellence may rot over the years while a gifted teacher in a poor institution in some remote corner of the country can make a gem of a learner of average track record. This is a fact, or else a poor country like India would never have been so much worried about the issue of massive brain drain.

It is this confusion coupled with the capitalist faith in the saving power of the market (albeit shattered these days by the global recession and consequent 'blood bath' in job-market) that encouraged the pro-reformists to recommend reduction of subsidy in Higher Education. In order to bridge the gap between increasing demand and meagre supply the Public Private Partnership policy, commonly known as PPP — was adopted at the turn of the century. Once the door was opened for the private sector, things have changed in a way beyond all calculation. The tempo of privatization can be gathered from the statistics that between 2001 and 2006 the percentage of such institutes in India soared from 43% to 63%. Most of these institutes, best described as degree-selling centres, are governed by profit maximization principle, and since means (purchasing power) is rated above intelligence, merit invariably suffers in such institutes. It is also to be kept in mind that the private sector has not the least respect for high ideals of education. It offers only market-friendly courses and in most cases the knowledge-traders

cheat their clients by information asymmetry. They meretriciously showcase their facility and their faculty in the prospectus, but what one actually finds is less than what is promised. They get free land from the Government for giving special concession to the underprivileged but actually no such concession is available and hence the poor meritorious have can hardly step into such institutes. Since the NKC has recommended 20% cost recovery, education even in public institutes is going to be unaffordable to the poorest of the poor. The solution that the central planners have thought of is taking educational loan for purchasing quality education. One does not have to be a prophet to predict that banks will prefer only the affluent class with high repayment capacity and those who really require loan will continue to be excluded.

Since we are moving towards knowledge society, the importance of Higher Education can hardly be exaggerated. The cycle of history is irreversible and knowledge-traders are already in the market and the public sector is to compete with them .Ay, there is the rub! Are we ready to compete? Here there is lamentable absence of accountability. Gone are the days of the *gurus* hypnotizing their disciples with their thoughts under a tree. Large buildings have come up, the rooms have been enviably furnished and air-conditioned, but for lack of accountability the system is on the verge of collapse. The erosion of work culture in the academy has made us vulnerable to the inroads of the prowling wolf, the market. As per 2006-07 Annual Report of the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation the cost over-run of 840 uncompleted projects (up to September 2006) is Rs 45,870 crore. We never try to calculate that if 10 teachers having 5 classes each everyday go to their classes 10 minutes late, the time lost is 500 minutes which amounts to over 8 hours a day. Not that *24 x 7* is a healthy work culture – it will invite what the Japanese call *karoshi* or fatigue death. But if our teaching community continues to be apathetic, either the market will make us redundant or the bureaucrats will dictate humiliating terms and ask a teacher to prove that 'preparation days' were really spent in the library. Rather than that let us equip ourselves work–culturally to fight the devil in its own den. It is worth remembering that what ultimately matters in every field of education is not glamorous website or swiftest data processor but a team of dedicated workforce. Excellence consists not in reaching but crossing the benchmark; our teachers, I do believe, are capable of achieving it.